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Englishmen in the Engadine

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Dr. Carl Camenisch

ENGLISHMEN
IN THE ENGADINE

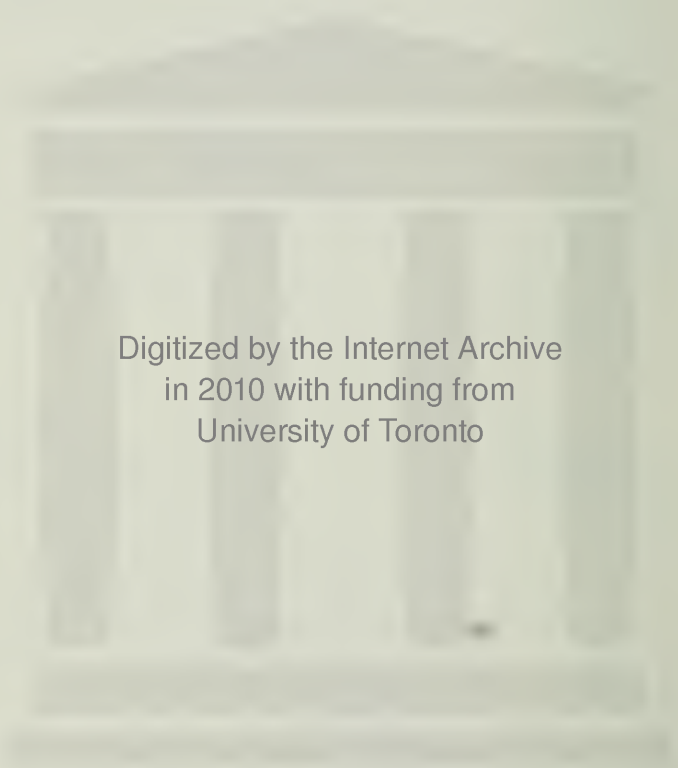


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The Cresta Run at St. Moritz in 1922

Photo Lämmel Zürich



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If the old chronicles and verbal tradition are to be believed, a Briton came to the Rhaetian mountains as long as eighteen hundred and more years ago. « Anno as one counts 80 after God's birth, there was St. Lucius, a born king of the Scots, living in the Rhaetian mountains . . . » It was certainly no mundane desire for the beauties of nature or for sport that had impelled him to make his way to the Grisons mountains, but a holy zeal for the well-being of the souls of the people, whom he taught to pray to the God of the Christians instead of to the young wieoxen which had hitherto been the objects of their worship. Though critics may find much to question both in the date and in the poetic trappings which enshroud and darken the core of historic truth (of recent times King Lucius from Britannia has not only been deprived of his crown, but has even been turned by philologists into a native of the Prätigau), the fact remains that in the earliest times evangelists from England pilgrimaged among Rhaetia's valleys and mountains. Not without reason has St. Lucius become the patron saint of the Engadine; not for nothing does he now adorn the heraldic arms and the seals of the Valley. Another Briton, St. Florinus, has become even more important for the Engadine, for his church at Ramosch was

for a thousand years a place of pilgrimage for the inhabitants of the valleys of the Inn and the Etsch far eastwards into Austria and far southwards into Italy. His father was, as Walafried Strabo relates in his « Life of St. Othmar », an Englishman and his mother a Jew whom the father had got to know on a journey to Rome and with whom he settled down at Mals after their marriage. The son was later handed over to the priest at Ramosch, and soon proved himself, by numerous miracles, to be a holy man. In his boyhood he already saw his first miracle. When one day he had to bring a jar of wine from the Castle of Tschanüff to the priest, who was preparing him for his clerical career, he gave the wine to a sick old man whom he found lying helpless by the wayside, and filled the jar with water. But the water turned into the most delicious of wines when the priest drank it.

A thousand years later faith in their convictions and zeal for their belief again drove Britons from their homeland into the Swiss and Grisons mountains, but this time they came to receive succour, not to give it. For when Bloody Mary tried to stamp out the Calvinists with fire and sword, many of them fled to Switzerland, where they had already lived and studied in the days of Zwingli, Bullinger and Calvin and with which country they were linked by ties not only of learning and religion, but of friendship too. The unhappy Queen, Jane Grey, the teacher of whose youthful days had been a Swiss, also wrote frequent letters to her Swiss friends. Testimony of this brisk traffic between England and reformed Switzerland, to which the reformed Grisons also belonged, is provided by the handwritten letters from the unhappy Jane at the Central Library in Zurich and by the goblet at the Landesmuseum with which Queen Elisabeth herself presented Bullinger. It was no accident that Englishmen were included among the many victims of perse-

cution who sought sanctuary in free Rhaetia, which was characterized in the 16th century by the widest freedom of belief, and it is no mere chance that the old and respected Engadine family name of Travers stands high in the list of defenders of the equally pious and libertarian ideas of the Puritans in England. I do not venture to decide whether there is any connection between this and the passionate partisanship of the Grisons people for Cromwell in his struggle with the Stuarts. But that this life-and-death struggle between two religious and political views cast its waves as far afield as the Grisons mountains can be seen from a poem which was written at that time into the land register of a remote Rhaetian village, in which Fairfax apostrophises the king in the following terms (freely translated):

« Why do you snort and bluster and rave,
A king must live as England wishes;
We set the bounds to the king's power
What do you think of your case, you stuaerts?
You cleave to the darkness of Popery
And live in the shackels of a jealous tyrant.
I call on behalf of the whole people;
Let us stop appointing kings;
We want to be a free republic;
You shall reign no longer in England, I vow!
To the death, to the death, why do we tarry;
You must now do as England dictates.
You have lost, we won, the game! »

At the time of the Grisons revolts England had an opportunity to return the protection and service rendered them a hundred years previously. When the Grisons protestants were being subjected to growing pressure from the House of Austria and Spain, an « envoy of the

King of England » appeared at Coire and delivered a fine speech to the effect that he had always remembered them and, for religion's sake England would protect the Grisons protestants in their ancient rights and liberties. Soon the Swiss, Dutch and English became more closely linked together, Cromwell being also very keen on this offensive and defensive alliance, and just as the Engadine cleric Jürg Jenatsch had discarded his ecclesiastical gown to take up the sword under Mansfeld's flag against the Emperor and Empire which were devastating his homeland, so did the waves of war doubtless cast up many a valiant son of the alps on the Albion's beaches. It would have been no wonder if their lances, which in those wild times made so many a great one still greater or overthrew him as the case might be, had not been wielded in these battles too. They were certainly not unknown in England. More than a hundred years previously the cultured and scholarly diplomat Pace had recommended them to the King with the words: « He who has the goodwill of the Swiss is lord of the earth. »

Apart from their fame as warriors, little of a favourable nature was related by the English at that time concerning the Swiss. Thomas More and others reproach them, probably not without reason, with greed and coarseness, and the great Shakespeare knows the « Switzers » only as mercenary soldiers and palace guards and believes (as in fact at that time a learned German doctor also wrote) the inhabitants of the alps to be for the most part idiots and imbeciles.

But after the restoration of the Stuarts, when many followers of Cromwell and the Republic fled to hospitable Switzerland before the vengeance that was visited in the most ghastly manner on the « murderers of kings », the English revised their opinion of the « barbarians ».

As far back as 1608 the Englishman Thomas Coryate had passed through the Grisons on his way back from Italy and had subsequently, in his « Crudities » related much of interest about this country to his compatriots. He was a good observer and had also informed himself well as to the historical development of the country and its subjects. He particularly praises the excellent wine of the Valtelline and apostrophises the deplorable Italian of the region's inhabitants, whose pronunciation he claimed was even coarser and harder than that of the Bergamasks, who annually climb up the Grisons Alps with thousands of sheep, these mountains being too steep for cattle. At Chiavenna he found the first Calvinists of Italian nationality, and among them a great scholar named Johannes Curtabatus. In the company of a Catholic priest who extols to him the safety of the region, never in all his long life having heard of any case of highway robbery, however insignificant, he proceeds to the Splügen Pass and reaches Thusis via the Schams Valley. After a somewhat prolonged stay at Coire he continues his journey to Zurich and Basle. He praises the Grisons people as being more skilled than the English in the working up of hemp. Their country has much in common with England, he states, as regards climate and occupation, but the Grisons people drink wine, whilst the English prefer ale. On several occasions he emphasizes with evident relish how well and cheaply one can live among these people, and he finds the flesh of the marmot much to his liking. As for the wealth of fruit offered by Coire and its surroundings, he deems this unequalled in the world. He is struck also by the timber roofs and the small windows, and the tables which, thick and narrow, always remind him of Somerset cheese. The burghers of Coire were in a state of great excitement as the time; they had recently repaired and embellished the Martin Fountain

and were now having to pay particularly heavy taxes in consequence.

In the eighteenth century politics, criticism and the extension of democracy were the factors which, above all, brought the English and the Swiss together, and so it was that scientific luminaries and truly representative men came to the mountains of Rhaetia to study the people and their institutions; a people who, in their century-long struggles for justice and freedom had demonstrated the same tenacity as England's democrats. It is interesting to note that England's democratic victories found a resounding echo even in the Romansh folk literature. Dramas praising Lady Jane Grey and satirical songs on Charles I, the « decapitated tyrant », bear witness to the profound sympathy felt by the ordinary people.

Towards the end of the seventeenth century one of the « dethroners of kings », who had co-operated in the second deposition of the Stuarts, passed through the Grisons on his way to Italy on a voyage of investigation. The interesting matter contained in his book justifies a brief halt at this point.

Gilbert Burnet lived from 1643 to 1715. At one time he was professor of divinity at Glasgow University and subsequently a preacher in London. Charles II, who held him in high esteem, later turned from Burnet for reproaching him with his vices. When the last of the Stuarts, who reigned even worse than his predecessor, mounted the throne, Burnet went to Holland and was one of the leading promoters of the accession of William of Orange, whom he accompanied to England when it became a matter of urgency to depose the unworthy James II. Subsequently he became Bishop of Salisbury and wrote learned works on the Reformation and the history of his times, in which he himself had played an active part. In his letters dealing with his journey through

Switzerland he showed himself to be a shrewd and accurate observer of men and conditions. In 1686 there appeared in Rotterdam, under the title of « Some letters containing an account of what seemed most remarkable in Switzerland, Italy, etc. », a series of letters which C. Burnet had written home from Switzerland and Italy a year previously. In this now very rare brochure he records all kinds of interesting facts about the Grisons and the practices and customs in use there two centuries ago. Burnet had come to Coire in 1685 via Paris, Lyons, Geneva, Berne and Zurich, arriving just as the local parliament was assembled there. This was a circumstance which suited him admirably, for everywhere he went he took an interest in the religious and political conditions and institutions, and he took pleasure in recording in his letters what he had heard. At Coire he called on the Bishop and saw the Knight of Haldenstein, that petty prince whose realm was a village, driving in a coach to his miniature principality. The Valtelline murder and the Grisons revolts were still vividly recollected, and he accordingly dwelt at length on these matters. Justice, which is based mainly on Roman law, he found brief and good, but on the other hand he censured the prevalent bribery (the acceptance of pensions by the promoters of princes). As compared to France and Italy, however, little mendicancy was carried on in Rhaetia. At Coire he was interested by the details of protestant worship, which he found to contain much that was incomprehensible. For instance, he noted that the women, during prayer, all turned to the east, and that they attended divine service both morning and evening. Nevertheless, the clergy complained of the coldness of the Grisons people in religious matters. The Englishman was greatly impressed by the prerogative of appointment and dismissal enjoyed by the people.

It need hardly be said that the linguistic confusion of the Grisons forced itself upon his attention. Romansh he called in one passage a corrupted Italian and in another a mixture of French and Italian.

In April 1685 more than five hundred protestants, expelled from the Tyrol and Salzburg, had come to Coire and collections were at that time being made on their behalf. The majority of the fugitives had turned to Brandenburg and the Palatinate and found refuge there.

From Coire, Burnet proceeded via Thusis to the Splügen. In the Viamala he found the track not merely hewn into the rock, but in places even laid on stout beams projecting from the rock face and fitted with planks in similar fashion to the sprayswept bridge on the Gothard. Not much better was the road through the Roffla Gorge between Andeer and Rheinwald. He went so far as to call Splügen a town, so much activity and prosperity did he find there. At that time there were five hundred horses at this staple town through which passed the greater part of the commodities transported from Italy to Germany and vice versa. Here, as at other places in Switzerland, the Grisons and Italy, he was struck by the peculiarity of the bridges which, in spite of their altitude and narrowness, were fitted either with no railings at all or with railings at one side only. This, he claimed, was only possible because the people were more moderate drinkers than others, and this in spite of the fact that they possessed an excellent and cheap local wine, the Valtelline. He was particularly impressed at Chiavenna by a type which he called «aromatik wine», probably a kind of vin santo or muscatel. He also found excellent the food served to him in the Grisons and the states subject to the latter. As for the fish, it was better than anywhere else in the world. Unfortunately, our traveller was not able to tell us at first hand about the Engadine, for his

journey did not take him there, but from others he had heard a story from that district which he related in detail and which reflects the excitement of the confessional struggles of the 16th and 17th centuries. *

A nephew of Pope Gregory XIV, the monk Sfondrate, who performed miracles and aspired to a martyr's crown, came to the heretical Engadine where he hoped to win that crown in his struggles with the «unbelievers». Shortly before, his brother had come to the Valley to take the waters there, and had got to know the country's leading families. When the monk now came as well, he was, to his chagrin, received with great friendliness. Although he did everything he could to irritate the heretics by ridiculing their religion, they did not make a martyr of him; in fact they did not even reply to his provocations, a lack of response which so angered him that he went to Bormio and died there through fretting over the martyr's crown which had evaded him. On the other hand, at the same period a religious war almost broke out in the otherwise so conciliatory and tolerant Engadine, all over a procession. But a «miracle», which later proved to be the most natural of phenomena, held the brethren back from their «battle» at the last moment. Burnet also mentions the mysterious inscription «*Omitto Rhaetos Indomitos*» on the Julia Columns which had lately been discovered, an inscription which is said to originate from Julius Caesar. But as he did not see it himself, he refrains from expressing any opinion. It is a pity that his journey did not take him over the Julia Pass; his delightful manner of relating and his acute gift of observation would no doubt have ensured that we should have been able to learn much of interest about the country and people in the Valley of the Inn.

If so far religion and politics had been the predominant interests in England, appreciation of the natural beauties

of the country was now awakening more and more. From now on the people and their customs and exploits retreat more and more into the background in the reports of English travellers, and the world of the mountains takes their place. Animal life also finds an honoured place side by side the records of human activities.

In 1664, when the learned Englishman John Ray had travelled over the Grisons mountains, he had had himself well wrapped up in a sledge and his eyes bound as a protection against the cold; this folly (because the snow lodged on his eyelids and turned to ice) nearly cost him his eyesight. But now this terror of the « grim » mountains diminished more and more. It was a different spirit that moved Addison to say, after travelling to Switzerland over the mountains, that the sight of the alps, cleft into many steep slopes, gave the beholder a profound thrill of pleasure.

Rousseau had broken the spell that lay over God's sublime nature. Haller and his poetic disciples began to sing its praises and to extoll them in words, but it was Englishmen who first ventured to climb the high mountains and conquer the highest peaks. If popular tradition is to be believed (and there is no reason why it should not), an Englishman attempted as much as 200 years ago to climb the highest mountain in the Engadine and the Eastern Alps. The French traveller Depping records in his « Tableau historique de la Suisse », published a hundred years ago, that a century previously an Englishman had perished high up on the Bernina Glacier because he could not find the way back into the valley, and his body, enveloped in a red garment and preserved by the ice, had been visible from a great distance for a long time afterwards.

Evidence of the lively interest which the Grisons aroused in English travellers in the 18th century is provided by

the circumstance that William Coxe, M.A., F.R.S., F.A.S., Rector of Bemerton, dedicates to that region the greater portion of his three-volume work « Travels in Switzerland », which was the fruit of visits paid to that country over a period of many years (1776—1786) and in which he also mentions the economic development of the three Rhaetian Federations and expatiates in great detail on the linguistic peculiarities of the district.

That Englishmen at that time began to interest themselves in these cultural questions (and still do so, as is substantiated by the mere mention of the name of W.A.B. Coolidge) was the great achievement of a Grisons man, Planta, a native of the Engadine, who rose to be Director of the British Museum and wrote a number of learned works introducing his Romansh mother tongue to the English and explaining its historical and philological basis. The fact that his son, Joseph Planta, became Chancellor of the Exchequer in Wellington's Ministry played its part, of course, in enhancing Englishmen's respect for the culture of the Alpine dwellers, a people which one of England's greatest scholars, Thomas More, had described in his « Utopia », under the name of « Zapoletes », as a semi-savage, uncivilised race.

Towards the end of the century journeys to and through Switzerland and the Grisons became so popular amongst other nations also that the caricaturists gladly seized on the peculiarities and, in particular, the incredible costumes of the travellers. One of these parties turned up armed to the teeth and dressed in Arabian costumes « so as to impress the mountain dwellers and deter them from any possible predatory intentions », but only succeeded in making itself a laughing stock. The former « fearful descriptions » now transformed themselves in many cases into precursors of Daudet's « Tartarin on the Alps ». The Grisons news sheets already being published at that time

(needless to say, there were no Tourists' Gazettes) started recording the names and dates of arrival of prominent visitors. Thus we learn that the poets Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Johann Gottfried Herder and Lord Clive passed through the Grisons in 1788. About the turn of the century, Switzerland and the Grisons (now definitely united with the former) were closed to the English by « orders from above ». Napoleon, who had laid his powerful hand on both territories, had said in 1802 to the Helvetic Consulta in Paris: « The English have no business in Switzerland », and his wish was at that time as good as an order to larger states than the Grisons. But in 1814, when his star was on the wane, the English despatched the distinguished diplomat Stratford Canning to Switzerland to look after their interests once more. This gentleman was very keen, both during his four years' stay in Switzerland and for a long time after he had returned to his homeland, on promoting friendship between the English and the Swiss.

Visits to the Grisons mountains became really popular in England as a result of the publication in 1838 of Murray's « Guide for travellers to Switzerland », which stood up successfully to the competition of the red-backed Baedeker right down to our own times.

The tourists were soon followed by the artistic fraternity. About 80 years ago William Turner painted his picture « The Splügen » during a visit to the Grisons. This painting was described by Ruskin as « the best Swiss landscape painted by man ». And Ruskin, who came to see the Grisons mountains on the heels of Turner, expressed the enthusiastic opinion that a mountain landscape was more splendid than « all the stones in Venice ».

For a long time English guests predominated to such an extent in the now flourishing Grisons holiday resorts that a German author was once moved to write, some-

what acidly: « We all know that Switzerland is a free country belonging to the English. » About half a century ago the English still accounted for about 85 0/0 of all visitors to the Engadine, and it was only towards the end of the century that the ratio altered in favour of the Germans.

That is why the English became the pioneers of winter sports. Goethe's panegyric on the splendour of the mountains in winter, his « Harzreise im Winter », had fallen, and not only in his own country, upon deaf ears, but when the spell began to lift which had thrown a curtain of prejudice and incomprehension round the mountains in their wintry mantle, the English were among the first adherents of a new epoch.

Thus it was that St. Moritz became a winter holiday centre, too, when in 1864 the first winter tourist took up residence at Johann Badrutt's « Kulm Hotel ». He was soon followed by others. And that the sons and daughters of Albion felt at home there is proved by the fact that when Hans Badrutt (whom the « Engadiner Post » recently congratulated in worthy fashion on his seventieth birthday) was christened in 1876, all his godparents were of British nationality.

The first winter hotel, the « Kulm », was the first of many, and the hopes of Johann Badrutt, the far-sighted « father of St. Moritz », were soon to be fulfilled. Years previously he had written in his visitors' book the prophetic words: « If strangers knew how beautiful, how mild, and how salubrious the Engadine is in winter, they would come here in December, January and February too. Only those who have themselves spent a winter here can realise what it is like. »





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